DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 657 SO 033 623

AUTHOR Reynolds, Richard J.
TITLE A Long View of the Literary Debate: E. D. Hirsch Jr. and His Forebears.
PUB DATE 2002-02-00
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Criticism; *Cultural Literacy; *Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; *Scholarship
IDENTIFIERS Comenius (Johann Amos); *Core Knowledge; Educational Issues; Hirsch (E D); Toynbee (Arnold J)

ABSTRACT

An immediate best seller when it was published in 1987, E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know" galvanized legions on both sides of the sociopolitical aisle that divides education. The book has become a revered text regularly referenced by those scholars who take up a position that may be loosely referred to as "on the educational right." For Hirsch, literacy means understanding what is read, and to understand what is read a person needs to have the appropriate background knowledge, or core knowledge. This paper discusses Hirsch's contention and how he outlines his case in a series of syllogistic statements in "Cultural Literacy." The paper notes that the link among culture, language, education, and individual and societal well-being appeared earlier in the work of the historian Arnold Toynbee. In the 17th century, the Czechoslovakia theologian and pioneer pedagogue John Amos Comenius struggled with the aim of universal education, proposing the concept of a central core of knowledge to which further knowledge is added sequentially. It considers what several critics of the core knowledge concept have to say about Hirsch's ideas--critics such as Peter McLaren, Edward DeBono, and Ivan Illich. The paper concludes that the chasm that exists between Hirsch and his critics is that, while Hirsch speaks to a method, his critics speak to a goal and that perhaps an argument can be fashioned for a concept of cultural literacy that pays greater attention to specific contexts. (Contains 15 references.) (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 465 657

A Long View of the Literary Debate: E. D. Hirsch Jr. and His Forebears.

Richard J. Reynolds

SO 033 623

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R.J. Reynolds

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A Long View of the Literacy Debate: E.D. Hirsch Jr. and His Forebears

Richard J. Reynolds
Eastern Connecticut State University

E.D. Hirsch Jr. entered the national arena of US education and made his contribution to the literacy imbroglio with the 1987 publication of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. An immediate best seller, the book galvanized legions on both sides of the sociopolitical aisle that divides education. In the dozen or more years since its publication *Cultural Literacy* has become a revered text regularly referenced by those scholars who take up a position that may be loosely referred to as "on the educational Right."

In a filmed interview Hirsch opens the discussion with the familiar refrain that we are faced with "a national crisis in education." He goes on to explain that that while the "answer is literacy" defining *what literacy is* remains the challenge. It is in attempting to clarify this concept that he outlines the key elements of his Cultural Literacy approach. To quote Hirsch "literacy is more than just the actual mechanics of reading. Literacy means understanding what you read and

to understand what you read you need to have the appropriate background knowledge." (Core Knowledge Foundation, 1996 & 1993)

In Hirsch's view 'appropriate background knowledge' is the collective and relevant wisdom in our culture that he styles *core knowledge*. This *core knowledge* can and should be catalogued and taught. His position is that this is a discrete, relatively small body of specific information possessed by all literate Americans and that this information is the foundation of American culture. Hirsch makes it clear that he does not intend to create his own view of world history but rather he focuses on "shared literate knowledge, 80 percent of which is over 100 years old." (Hirsch in *Change*, 1988, p. 25)

Granted these assumptions, Hirsch crisply outlines his case in a series of syllogistic statements early in *Cultural Literacy*. These statements can be paraphrased as follows: because there is a "descriptive list of the information actually possessed by literate Americans," and because "all human communities are founded upon specific shared information," and because "shared culture requires transmission of specific information to children" it follows that "the basic goal of education in a human community is acculturation." In Hirsch's terms "The acculturative responsibility of the schools is primary and fundamental." (Hirsch, 1987, p.18)

Of course, this claim of 'The acculturative responsibility of the schools' raises the question – whose culture? America is, perhaps, the single most multicultural nation on earth. There is no longer (if there ever was) a single culture that could claim to represent the American nation. Further more, when Hirsch argues that teachers are required to transmit the praiseworthy aspects of the American cultural heritage he makes the neoclassical assumption that this culture, somehow, contains knowledge. This is in contradistinction to those educational theorists who claim that knowledge is socially constructed.

For Hirsch cultural literacy is both the problem and the solution to the national crisis in education. "But in the United States only two thirds of our citizens are literate . . . The remaining third need to be brought as close to true literacy as possible." (p. 2) Our cultural illiteracy marks the decline of our society: attacking this problem by extending the range of "the [shared] network of information that all competent readers possess" (p. 2) will alleviate our present, sorry condition.

Hirsch's conclusion based on the above reasoning is equally direct and takes the discussion well beyond the realm of pure intellectual speculation; "To be culturally literate," Hirsch says, "is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world." (Hirsch, 1987, p. xiii). Hirsch proposes a theoretical formulation that warrants consideration. His summary belief is "that shared information is a

necessary background to true literacy." With more than a touch of hyperbolic license he describes cultural literacy as "the key to all other fundamental improvements in American education." (Hirsch, 1987. p.2)

Although this hubris may serve to offend some, Hirsch does raise issues that have challenged thinkers for some time. It is, however, important to recognize that the link between culture, language, education, and individual and societal wellbeing did not spring solely from the mind of E.D. Hirsch. Earlier writers as well as contemporaries outside the academic milieu have addressed the issue of the utility of *core knowledge*.

No less an historian than Arnold Toynbee, author of the massive ten volume *A Study of History*, wrote in the conclusion to Myers' (1960) *Education in the Perspective of History* that the development and decay of a civilization depends on its ability to respond to the challenges which it faces from within and without. His focus was to look at history in terms of great cultural and ethical groups rather than nations. To this end a critical component for Toynbee is the interplay of collective culture, social progress and the role of education. He wrote:

> "Education is a specifically human activity. Unlike other animals, man inherits something over and above what is transmitted to him automatically by physical and psychic heredity. He inherits a culture, which the members of the rising generation acquire, not as an automatic birthright, but through being inducted into it by their elders. Human culture is not built into human minds; it is a mental

> tool that is transmitted, held and operated by them, and it is detachable and variable. Our minds are like handles to which alternative systems can be fitted." (Myers, 1960, p. 269)

Later in the same essay Toynbee addresses the role of education in this process:

> "In most human societies in most times and places so far, education, in the broad sense of the transmission of a cultural heritage, has been an unselfconscious and unorganized activity. People have mostly acquired their ancestral culture in the way in which they learn their mother tongue. They associate with their elders and learn from them unconsciously, while the elders, on their side are hardly more conscious of being teachers. . . .
>
> This unsophisticated kind of education continues to play an important part even in societies in process of civilization in which organized and formal systems of education have come to be established. Even in educational institutions in which the official staple is book learning, the forming of habits and the training of character are still largely left to be taken care of by the spontaneous effects of social relations between the rising generation and its elders . . ." (Myers, p. 269-70)

Toynbee concludes with a clarion call very similar to the later utterances of E.D. Hirsch

> "How then are our educational institutions to convey this overwhelmingly massive heritage of knowledge to a puny and ephemeral mind? The task would be an intimidating one even if we could confine it to the education of the privileged heirs of the western cultural tradition. These, if anyone should be receptive to an education of this comprehensive kind; for it is they who have called into existence the worldwide social framework within which the whole human race is now living. This has started as a Western framework (though no doubt it will turn into a very different one); and the privileged minority in the Western society has played the chief part in giving it its present shape. Thus they, if anyone, ought to feel at home in it. Yet how hard it is, today to educate even this favored minority to cope with what is its own heritage. And before

> we have seen our way to solving even this limited educational problem, we have to plunge on into the still more difficult problems of educating the underprivileged minority of Westerners and the huge non-Western majority of the human race, for whom the present Western framework of their life is something alien and uncongenial." (Myers, p. 279)

Although Toynbee does not refer to "literacy" per se, he does speak to many of the assumptions and conclusions later espoused by Hirsch. Without sacrificing credibility, what Toynbee refers to as 'culture' can easily be equated with Hirsch's 'core knowledge.' Both Toynbee and Hirsch allude to the same mechanism for transmission; information is passed from one set of wise men, be they 'elders' or 'literate people', to another. And while there are certainly other point of comparison, perhaps the most important is that they both make a plea for the educational system to assume stewardship over this process of transmission. Toynbee speculated on these phenomena, Hirsch took it further to actually catalogue the necessary information in his now famous 'list'. Further, Hirsch responded by creating curricular material. For Hirsch this was no longer an area of academic speculation, rather it was a call to action.

For centuries writers and pedagogues have grappled with this issue of what constitutes the central body of knowledge necessary for future learning and discourse. In the 17th Century the Czech theologian and pioneer pedagogue John Amos Comenius struggled with the aim of universal education. He proposed the concept of a central core of

knowledge to which all further knowledge is added sequentially. In *The Great Didactic* he wrote:

> "The remedy for this want of a system is as follows: at the very commencement of their studies, boys should receive instruction in the first principles of general culture, that is to say, the subjects learned should be arranged in such a manner that the studies that come later introduce nothing new, but only expand the elements of knowledge that the boy has already mastered." (quoted in Gross, p. 22-39)

Hirsch, Toynbee and Comenius share some common elements; [a] there is a seminal core of knowledge distillate, and [b] this information must precede and be in a logical progression for whatever follows, and [c] this is essential for the development of individuals as well as society. This last phase in the sequence is important in understanding the work of E.D. Hirsch. What was referred to earlier in this paper as Hirsch's hubris is actually a core element of his thesis. The accrual of core knowledge is not simply intellectual 'leger de main' or slight of hand. This material has value, and not just simple value; it is critical. This is not solely knowledge for knowledge's sake; it has utilitarian value.

This utilitarian aspect of Hirsch's thesis also finds considerable support in earlier political philosophy. Herbert Spencer's famous essay "What Knowledge is of Most Worth", published in 1860, greets this argument boisterously. While Spencer's conclusion in terms of *what should be taught* would no doubt bear little resemblance to Hirsch's

list, his reasoning around *why it should be taught* rings fully resonant with Hirsch's view of cultural literacy. Both would call this simply a question of utilitarian value: we need the information to progress and thrive. Spencer lamented:

"Among mental as among bodily acquisitions, the ornamental comes before the useful. Not only in times past, but almost as much in our own era, that knowledge which conduces to personal wellbeing has been postponed to that which brings applause." (in Gross, p.81). Locke first formulated Spencer's basic approach. That philosopher wrote: "Since it cannot be hoped he (the pupil) should have time and strength to learn all things, most pains should be taken about that which will be of most frequent use to him in the world." (in Gross, p. 79). This "common sense" approach that education ought to be useful may have been attributed to Dewey and resurrected by Hirsch but its origins can be traced to Spencer and Locke.

Criticisms of the Core Knowledge Concept

The idea that it is critical to pass on select wisdom in a sequential way through the education system is not new. The phenomenon that is new, however, is the acrimonious debate that followed Hirsch's declaration. One of the most strident of contemporary critics is Peter McLaren.

A leading spokesman among Critical Theorists, McLaren takes umbrage at the idea that Hirsch and his colleagues can create a core knowledge list that is chastely utilitarian and serves to further what he sees as invidious power relationships. McLaren writes, "Critical pedagogy is fundamentally concerned with understanding the relationship between and knowledge. The dominant curriculum separates knowledge from the issue of power and treats it in an unabashedly technical manner; knowledge is seen in overwhelmingly instrumental terms as something to be mastered. That knowledge is always an ideological construction linked to particular interests and social relations generally receives little consideration in educational programs." (McLaren, 1998. P. 183)

McLaren's concern is that the information deemed appropriate may have as its sole purpose, conscious or not, the furtherance of an existing social order at the expense of the disenfranchised. McLaren is correct when he argues that this information is chosen by a select few. The methodology used by Hirsch to divine his list involved Hirsch and two colleagues who then "submitted it to more than a hundred consultants outside the academic world." (Hirsch, 1997, p. 135). The tacit assumption in this methodology is that those who composed and edited the list were able to decide what is appropriate. Others have recognized the potential threat in this process.

In an essay exploring the meaning of truth and knowledge Edward De Bono reflected on the same theme, and while his presentation is a bit more puckish his conclusions certainly support McLaren's message.

> "The mind divides the continuity of the world around us into discrete units. Partly this is made obligatory by the nervous organization of the brain and the consequent limited span of attention. Partly it is deliberately done in order to understand things by breaking them down into parts that are already familiar. This process was illustrated with the visual situation in the last chapter. It was seen that the part were deliberately extracted from the whole situation and then fitted together by means of fixed relationships to re-create the whole. Thus a continuous process of change may be arbitrarily cut at some convenient point, and what goes before the cut may be linked to what goes after by the familiar relationship of cause and effect. The choice of the parts into which the whole is dissolved is dictated by familiarity, convenience and the availability of simple relationships with which to recombine them. A relationship is record of how the two pieces fitted together before the division. When the same division has been made over and over again, the units come to acquire an identity of their own. Like food packages on the shelves of a supermarket, the packages of information formed by established ways of dividing things up lie waiting for someone to select them and convert them into an interesting meal. Unfortunately the packets of information assembled in this manner tend to support the established point of view." (De Bono, 1967, p. 71)

Another thoughtful, if *avant garde*, intellectual, Ivan Illich, spoke very clearly to this concept of 'knowledge by consensus.' In *Tools for Conviviality* Illich wrote:

> "The institutionalization of knowledge leads to a more general and degrading delusion. It makes people depend on having their knowledge produced for them. It leads to a paralysis of the moral and political imagination.
>
> The knowledge consumer depends on getting packaged programs funneled to him. He finds security in the expectation that his neighbor

> and his boss have seen the same program and read the same columns. The procedure by which personal certainties are honestly exchanged is eroded by the increasing recourse to exceptionally qualified knowledge produced by a science, profession, or political party." (Illich, 1973, p. 93-94.)

Illich's acerbic criticism of this process has also been the topic of theoretical speculation by philosophers. 'The Problem of the Criterion' is an aptly named chapter in Roderick Chisholm's book *Theory of Knowledge*. Chisholm grapples with the paired questions of "What do we know?" and "What are the *criteria* of knowing?"

> "But the appeal to such 'sources' leaves us with a kind of puzzlement. If the question how are we to decide, in any particular case, whether we know?' is seriously intended, then the reply "An ostensible item of knowledge is genuine if, and only if, it is the property of a properly accredited source of knowledge' is not likely to be sufficient. For such a reply naturally leads to further questions: 'How are we to decide whether an ostensible source of knowledge *is* properly accredited?' and "How are we to decide just what it is that is yielded by a properly accredited source of knowledge?'" (Chisholm, 1966, p. 58).

Another interesting reflection on this theme is found in the work of Charles Stevenson who looked at a fundamental question of ethics; how much can individuals be influenced by reason, and . . . how do we define reason? Stevenson captures the essence of Hirsch's thesis that knowledge, and hence attitudes (the not-so-hidden linkage made by the Critical Pedagogy school) are linked. In an elegant nod to the intellectual antecedents of Western thought Stevenson writes:

> "No attitude, not even an intrinsic one, can be deeply ingrained into a person's nature unless it is reinforced by other, and has a place in the economy of his multiple aims.
>
> In an interesting passage in Plato's *Republic,* Adeimantus abuses the moralists for "defending the conventional virtues as a means, insisting that this procedure produces only a semblance of virtue." (Stevenson, 1969, p.200).

The discussion thus far has served to point out that the work of Hirsch, while very 'cutting edge' in terms of addressing a pressing need did have antecedents. The discussion has also served to elucidate that criticism of this *mode* of problem solving does generate criticism both within and outside of the mainstream academic community. Is there an ending to this story?

Conclusion

An examination of Hirsch's stated aims and curricular strategies in *Cultural Literacy* can leave one conflicted. We can be, at one and the same time, aware of the dogmatic traits and cultural assumptions inherent in the text yet sympathetic with the premise of Hirsch's work as well as his curricular devices and conclusions. While strident claims of arrogance can be leveled at Hirsch, he has courageously chosen to address issues of difficult and politically charged content. Only time will tell if there is long term merit to his approach. The question is to decide if this is an either/or phenomenon. Must one accept the views of

Hirsch and abandon all other methods, or, vice-versa? There would appear to be little virtue or benefit in any conclusions that may actually be driven more by ego than sound reasoning and research.

Amongst all the approaches to the literacy question there seem to be a lot of very sound ideas; it would probably make sense to look at each of them as a tool to be used when the job suited. Perhaps an argument can be fashioned for a concept of cultural literacy that pays greater attention to specific contexts. Bertrand Russell addressed this concept, elegantly, in his book *Education and the Modern World,* published in 1932;

> "Three divergent theories of education all have their advocates in the present day. Of these the first considers that the sole purpose of education is to provide opportunities of growth and to remove hampering influences. The second holds that the purpose of education is to give culture to the individual and to develop his capacities to the utmost. The third holds that education is to be considered rather in relation to the community than in relation to the individual, and that its business is to train useful citizens. Of these theories the first is the newest while the third is the oldest. The second and third theories have in common the view that education can give something positive, while the first regards its function as purely negative. No actual education proceeds wholly and completely on any one of these three theories. All three in varying proportions are found in every system that actually exists. It is, I think, fairly clear that no one of the three is adequate by itself, and that the choice of a right system of education depends in great measure upon the adoption of a due proportion between the three theories." (Russell in Gross, p. 213)

The chasm that exists between Hirsch and his critics is that while Hirsch speaks to a method his critics speak to a goal. In any event they

are at opposite poles and we ought to avoid the seductive tendency to find 'one true belief'. As Rousseau wrote;

> "May I venture here to lay down the greatest most important, and most useful rule of education? It is this: Not to gain time, but to lose it. The generality of readers will be so good as to excuse my paradoxes; there is an absolute necessity for them in making reflections: and, say what you will, I had rather be remarkable for hunting after a paradox, than for being misled by prejudice." (Rousseau, in Gross, p.49)

References

Chisholm, Roderick M. (1966) Theory of knowledge. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Comenius, John Amos. (1963). "To Teach All Things to All Men" in Ronald Gross (Ed.), The teacher and the taught (pp. 22-39). New York: Delta Books.

Core Knowledge Foundation (producer). ABC News "Solutions" (1996) and WVEC-TV "The Uncommon Classroom" (1993).

DeBono, Edward. (1967). The use of lateral thinking. London: Penguin Books.

Descartes, R. (1934) "Rules for the Direction of the Mind" in The philosophical works of Descartes, I E.S. Haldane and G.R. Ross (eds.). London: Cambridge University Press.

Hirsch, E.D. (1987). Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know. Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Hirsch, E.D. (1988, July/August). "A Postscript by E.D. Hirsch" Change. 20 (4), pp. 22-26.

McLaren, Peter (1998). Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education. New York: Longman.

Myers, E. (1960).Education in the perspective of history. New York: Harper.

Rousseau, Jean Jacques (1963). "The Evils of Education" in Ronald Gross (Ed.), The teacher and the taught (pp. 40-60). New York: Delta Books.

Russell, Bertrand (1963). "The Negative Theory of Education" in Ronald Gross (Ed.), The teacher and the taught (pp. 212-222). New York: Delta Books.

Spencer, Herbert (1963). "What Knowledge is of Most Worth" in Ronald Gross (Ed.), The teacher and the taught (pp. 79-100). New York: Delta Books.

Stevenson, Charles L. (1969). Ethics and language (13th. Ed.). New Haven and London. Yale University Press.

Toynbee, Arnold (1960). "Conclusions" in Edward D. Myers Education in the Perspective of History (pp. 269-289). New York: Harper and Brothers.

Yolton, J. (1971). John Locke and education. New York: Random House.